

THE NEW LANDSCAPE IN ALASKA FOR THE WASILLA WONDER

Back when I argued that Palin would probably not be the Republican candidate for President in 2012, I noted how much the landscape had changed for Palin in Alaska.

That's true, first of all, because the exposure of the campaign will bring some unanticipated setbacks to her.

[snip—note, I cut out a prediction that the personnel board investigation might be damning, which turned out to be dead wrong]

At the very least, her claim to be a reformer in Alaska won't fare well.

Then there's the fact that she's got at least two more years as governor before 2012—and there is no evidence that she is any more competent at governing than George Bush. So long as oil prices remain where they are, she's going to have a difficult time meeting the increased needs of an inflation-wracked Alaska.

Here's a really good inventory of the ways in which life for Sarah will change in Alaska. My favorites:

4 The Legislature

Palin's two-year record was much dissected during the presidential campaign. Some Alaska lawmakers complained she was disengaged at times. Democratic allies who helped with her priorities are now unhappy with her new national partisanship and the campaign's meddling in Troopergate. Her unhappiest critics have been Republicans who

resented how the "maverick reformer" painted dissenters as part of the "good old boy" network.

Back in Juneau, she's likely to face a new source of friction: budget-cutting tensions due to declining oil revenues.

[snip]

Palin also has work to do with some of her constituents. Big anti-Palin rallies in Anchorage during the campaign were unprecedented – Frank Murkowski never stirred that kind of passion. Coming home to vote in a Carhartts jacket shows she's thinking along those lines. (Or was she buffing her small-town, anti-fashion image for a national crowd? More second-guessing.)

5 The natural gas pipeline

With the nation sliding into recession and state oil revenues plunging, the gas line seems more important than ever to Alaska. Crossing the next big pre-construction hurdles would give Palin a big achievement to trumpet.

But there are plenty of perils in the next two years. The looming challenge involves the so-called "open season" – persuading the oil companies, through tax incentives, legal pressure or superior poker strategy, to commit to ship their gas reserves through the line.

Meanwhile the state will seek help from the Obama administration on rights of way and federal loan guarantees. Palin's pitch: that getting gas to the Lower 48 will lead the nation away from oil and provide a bridge to a new era of alternative energy sources. Obama did say during the presidential race he supports getting the gas line built.

While she's working on energy, Palin also faces the challenge of the warming Arctic and the rural energy crisis. Alaska's governor was described during the campaign as one of the nation's leading experts in energy security, so it won't do to have rural villagers shivering in the dark. There's been lots of talk about alternative energy projects, and money has been committed – but will there be any new kilowatts generated in the next two years of Palin's leadership?

6 Family and friends

OK, the kids will remain off limits, for the most part. But finding time for her growing family remains a significant challenge for Palin, alongside her work for the state and her new national prominence.

Todd Palin's role in the administration has been subjected to great scrutiny in the past two months, but there don't seem to be any new lines yet defining the first gentleman's responsibilities.

Now, I still think it unlikely that Palin will be the GOP nominee in 2012, for all these reasons. Though I do think one possibility has opened—replacing Toobz Stevens in the Senate—that offers her the clearest path to the nomination in 2012. If she were to replace Toobz in, say, March (after a special election; she almost certainly can't appoint herself), then she'd get out of Juneau before the effects of lower gas prices really devastate the Alaska budget and with it Sarah's claim to be a fiscal conservative. Hanging out in DC would give her the opportunity to go on taxpayer funded (because we know Sarah likes to have others pay for things for her) fact-finding trips to other countries, which will help her gain credibility and knowledge about foreign affairs. And if she replaced Toobz, she would presumably inherit

many of Toobz' staffers, who know their way around DC and could make her look good. Finally, she'd be at ready access for things like the Sunday shows, so she could keep her purty face in front of voters.

I still think it unlikely she will be the nominee in 2012. At the very least, positioning to do so from Alaska looks increasingly difficult.